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Combined Joint Task Force – Horn of Africa

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We then drive to the next closest water point. It is a hand dug well in the center of a dry riverbed. The woman is pulling out a bucket that holds about ½ a gallon of water at a time.

Part of the vision of the Combined Joint Task Force – Horn of Africa (CJTF-HOA) is to strengthen partnerships to contribute to the security and stability in East Africa. One way they do this is through humanitarian projects that benefit the local population, and build diplomacy with the host nation. While deployed as the Force Health Protection Officer to CJTF-HOA, I had the honor of working on a mission to determine the best location for several wells in northern Ethiopia.

It is hard for any of us to imagine not having water at the turn of a faucet, but villagers in Northern Ethiopia sometimes have to walk miles to get

water for their families and livestock. When they arrive at a well, they then may have to wait hours before it is their turn to draw water. CJTF-HOA, in partnership with the Ethiopian government, selected four areas in northern Ethiopia that were in desperate need of a water source.

A small team was put together to work with the Ethiopian locals to find locations that were suitable for serving as much of the population as possible. When we arrived at the villages, we were always warmly welcomed, and through our translator, we heard multiple stories of how a closer, more dependable water source could improve the lives of these people. One man explained how he could expand his flock of goats and sell more milk. One man had the money for a camel but was afraid he couldn't keep it alive if he bought one. A mother spoke of having to send her children miles away to collect water and then carry it home.

Our team asked the locals to show us where they currently get water. We walked about 20 minutes to a site where an NGO delivers water to a 1000-liter plastic tank and two shallow hand-dug pits about 4-feet wide, 6-feet long and 2-feet deep. The livestock drink from the shallow pits. The truck shows up about twice a week, and if it skips a delivery (which has happened), some of the livestock die. If it misses two deliveries in a row, the villagers are afraid people will die.

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We asked them where they get water when the truck does not come. A village leader offered to show us if we would drive him there. A 20-minute drive later, we arrived at a 12- to 15-foot-deep hand-dug well. It was located in the middle of a dry riverbed. A few women were lowering plastic buckets into the hole and coming up with about half a gallon of water each time. Upon closer inspection, we discovered that there was only about 4 inches of water in the bottom of the well and the women were very adept at getting the bucket to land on its side and fill up without scraping sand and gravel into it.

I watched a woman draw water for 45 minutes straight. She kept filling a trough until her donkeys were satisfied, and then she filled several goats skins with water that the donkeys carried home for her. The woman had trouble describing how far she came to get water, but she did explain that it was too far to come everyday.

The village leader explained that during the one or two rainstorms they get a year, a flash flood will sweep through the riverbed and fill in the well. After the water recedes, it has to be re-dug.



truck to this water point twice a week to fill the tank and two pits. The live stock drink from the pits. he livestock will die. If it misses two deliveries in a row, the villagers are afraid people will die. The “provided by the USA” and it is used to retrieve water from the tank.

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We returned to the village and discovered more people had arrived. They were excited but cautious. One young man finally worked up the courage to ask our translator why we did not have shovels if we were going to dig a well. It took a lot of creativity to explain the well-drilling rig and how it would punch a skinny hole down 150 feet into the earth. There was a little disappointment among the people when we explained that it would take three weeks for the well-drilling rig to arrive, but we reassured them that once it arrived, the work will happen quickly.

A lot more discussion occurred between our team and the village leaders, but, with a handshake, the agreement was finally made. The well will be located about 100 yards from the village school hut. The leaders celebrated by picking up stones and stacking them at the agreed-upon site. A little mound symbolized that the mission was complete.

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